

Is Your Pet Safe Outside in Cold Weather?

As the cold winter weather starts to hit our area, the air temperature has dropped dramatically and snow and ice are in the forecast. While not advisable, some people maintain their pets outside during the cold winter months. If you are one of these pet owners, please take into consideration the following criteria in providing the necessary protection for your pets:

Shelter – If you leave your pet outside alone for any amount of time, he or she must have weatherproof shelter. Dog and cat houses must be enclosed and have a covered doorway large enough for the animal to comfortably enter and exit. The shelter itself should be large enough for the animal to stand and turn around in, but not so big that the structure does not hold in your pet's body heat. The shelter must be raised at least two (2) inches off the ground (two by fours or wooden pallets often work) and bedding such as cedar shavings, straw, or some other non-absorbable material must be provided. If your animal is tethered, remember that the tether must be at least 15 feet in length and that it should be placed so that your pet cannot become tangled in foreign objects. Even short periods of time left out in the cold weather can result in your pet's safety being compromised.

Water – Even on the coldest of days, all animals must have access to clean water at all times. Because water freezes quickly in the winter, it may be necessary to heat your pet's water source and/or change your pet's water frequently so that he or she has access to non-frozen water. In the case of dogs, it is especially important to anchor the bucket or bowl properly to avoid the animal overturning it. Anchoring the bucket in the ground or securing it to a fence is advisable, as is placing a bowl in an old tire and filling in the perimeter with cement.

Health and Safety Issues – Outdoor cats can freeze to death in the cold winter weather and occasionally will be injured or killed by choosing to sleep under car hoods to keep warm. Dogs that are allowed to walk off leash in the snow and ice can easily become lost and disoriented due to a reduction in scent cues on the ground. Remember, cats and dogs that are allowed off leash on other's property are in violation of both city and county laws! Never leave a pet alone in a car as they can easily freeze to death. During the winter, people increase their use of antifreeze, which even in small amounts, is a deadly poison to dogs and cats as well as other animals. Dispose of your used antifreeze properly and thoroughly clean up spills. Consider your pet's age, breed (size, coat length, etc.), and physical health when exposing them to the cold winter weather.

While it is not advisable to maintain any pet outside, it is important to consider the risks of doing so and eliminate as many as possible to assure your pet's health and safety. Animals typically kept as indoor pets can react adversely when allowed outside, even if only for the day. Also, remember that all dogs, cats, and ferrets over four (4) months of age are required by law to have their rabies vaccination and current county license. County licenses are available at City Hall in College Park.

Please note that this is just a small list of required guidelines for allowing your pet outside; for a complete list of proper care requirements and cold weather tips feel free to contact animal control at 301-864-8877 or email ltthiele@ci.college-park.md.us